THE AWAKENING

By ANNIE S. SWAN

Hilda Stonham stood idly by the window of her sitting-room, and looked out upon a long stream of recruits, marching solemnly, four abreast, along the far side of the street.

Solemnly, and in absolute silence, without a strain of music, or a whistle, or a song! If they were inspired by the highest flame of patriotism which can illumine supreme sacrifice, there was no visable or outward sign of it. Some of the faces wore a sullen look, almost as if they resented the position in which they found themselves.

"It's very English," she muttered to herself. "But horrid, all the same. Why doesn't somebody cheer—?"

On the impulse of the moment, she opened the casement window, and fluttered a white handkerchief with a pink edge, out upon the murky air.

One caught sight of it, nudged his neighbour, and the four in that row touched their caps.

"I don't care! I envy them! Heavens, if I were only a man!" she muttered, as she shut the window, after watching the tailend disappear round the corner. "And how Gilbert can meet processions like that every day, and not be ashamed of himself, I can't think! It makes me dead ashamed to look them in the face."

Her face, which nature had originally made sweet, looked tired and sour at the moment; also, her thirty-two years were plainly discernable. Unusually, her slim figure, and a certain girlishness of style, took seven or eight years off. She had been Gilbert Stonham's wife for seven years. Happy years?—Well, only partially. They were childless, selfish people, who had weighed things up in the queer, cold-blooded, modern way, and decided they could not afford luxuries—children among the rest. Golf and bridge and theatres they must have; the rest had to go to the wall.

But homes are not built upon such foundations, and, during the last year, just before the war broke out, an immense weariness and disgust of life and of one another, had overwhelmed and encompassed them. They snapped at one another and were daily drifting further apart.

And now the war was six months old, and Hilda was feeling bitter and resentful because she had no stake in it; because Gilbert had not obeyed the call; and because she had not found the niche she thought she could so elegantly fill.

If only she were free! she sometimes passionately cried. But who among us is free? Hardly a mother's son or daughter.

The bitterness of her mood had not passed when at six o'clock she heard her husband's latchkey in the door. She did not run to meet him. The modern golf and bridge wife does not do that! It is crude, elementary,—simply not done.

She yawned slightly, looked bored, and, when he entered the room, hardly turned her head. But she had a very clever trick of being able to see without appearing to be interested; and she was so struck by something unusual in Gilbert's face, thta a question involuntarily sprang to her lips.

"Aren't you well, Gib?" she asked flippantly.

He was a slim, dark young man, with a face somewhat dissatisfied and careworn. Very well dressed after the fashion of the city man, but with something artificial and unreal about him. They lacked life and vitality—that young couple; they appeared old and tired before their time.

"I'm all right," he answered rather stiffly. "Any tea going?"

She elevated her brows.

"Six o'clock—and we are dining at the Northcrofts at seven-thirty."

"I'm not," he assured her calmly. "Better ring Ellie up and tell her. Fact is, Hilda, I've enlisted—"

"Enlisted?—How do you mean? Taken a commission, I suppose."

"No,—enlisted. I've always meant that if I did go in, I'd join thoroughly. There are too many weedy chaps wearing Sam Brownes already. I won't add to them. I'll earn my promotion, or go without it—that's all. It's the only way. It isn't fair to the Tommies,—they want to be led, and a chap has got to learn how to lead, before he tries to lead them. My views, Hilda—not worth much, perhaps, but there they are."

He spoke lightly, yet with a touch of defiance which indicated that he was not sure of his reception. Her face hardened.

"You're just talking rot, Gilbert. A common Tommy, you're going to be! Well, then, I forbid it; and, if you persist—why I wash my hands of you."

"Can't help it, old girl. That's my platform—see; and I can't alter it. I hoped you might see it same as I do,—but I might have known."

There was a world of reproach in the words, but Hilda Stonham, obsessed by her own purely selfish outlook, failed to notice it. When she had longed for husband to go to the war, she had pictured herself, walking with proper pride by the side of a well-dressed officer, entering restaurant or theatre by his side, and the blow to her pride was rather a shattering one.

She did not even, at that moment, enquire what regiment he had honoured by his selection, she did not actually believe that he would carry a plan so monstrous into execution until, three days later, when he turned up at the flat in Victoria Street, in the more or less well-fitting uniform of a private in the London regiment. She stared at him coldly, and shrugged her shoulders.

"So it was true, after all; and you have done it! Well, what do you suppose is going to become of me?"

"It will not make much, if any, difference to you, Hilda. You will have three pounds a week coming in, and you can either live here, with one of the servants, or you can let the flat and go home to your mother—"

"Thanks, awfully! But they don't want any returned goods at Mitcham. Besides, I should be ashamed to tell them. I'll let the flat, if I can, and simply disappear."

He did not ask where, for he had confidence in her, so far, that he believed she would not do anything foolish. She was far too self-centered and calculating to take any step that might endanger her reputation or position.

A little silence fell between them, then, and on Stonham's face there was rather a queer expression,—a mingling of regret, pathos, and wistfulness, that might have appealed to any woman's heart.

"All right. I know I can't dictate, Hilda. You've never allowed me to do that. Rather wish Christmas had been over before it happened. Where will you go for Christmas?"

"Don't bother about me," she said loftily. "I am quite capable of looking after myself."

The tone indicated that he had forfeited the right, if, indeed, she had ever granted it. A self-sufficient young woman had Hilda Stonham been, during all her married life, and had never awakened in her husband the protective instinct which is one of the sweetest attributes of love.

The steady sadness of his gaze disquited her, and there was something gnawing at her heart which she resented, and did not understand.

"Where is your training camp?" she asked, rather pettishly. "And when do you go to it?"

"Oh, Oxshott; and I go tomorrow."

"Of course you don't know how long you will be kept there before you are sent out to the front—"

"Are you in such a hurry, Hilda?" he asked, with a slightly melancholy touch.

"But I have to learn my bit, first."

There was no formal good-bye said on the morrow. Dreading it, indeed, Hilda went out for the day, leaving a note explaining that her engagements were too important to break. "And, after all, Oxshott is not very far away, and no doubt you'll get plenty of leave," she wrote.

Stonham's smile was a little wry, as he perused the hastily scribbled note, but perhaps he too was relieved.

Christmas fell in three weeks' time, but for the men who had newly joined, there was no Christmas leave.

After some deliberation with herself, Hilda decided to spend Christmas week at Bournemouth, where, in a fashionable hotel, something might be going on. It was quite full, and there were plenty of soldiers there, officers, on leave from the front, and others who had got a few days, and had brought their womenfolk away to get relief from war-work.

"SHE HAD PICTURED HERSELF WALKING BY THE SIDE OF A WELL-DRESSED OFFICER"

Hilda, good-looking, well-dressed, a good musician and dancer, was very popular. Without deliberate intention she lied about her husband, and gave the impression that he was an officer fighting in France.

A widow lady who had lost two sons in the war, and had come to Bounremouth with the third, on leave from the Flanders front, watched with uneasiness a flirtation growing up between the boy and the attractive Mrs. Stonham. She was a simple, straightforward, plain-spoken sort of woman, and when a word to the son did no good, she spoke out, quite frankly, in the lounge, one day, to Hilda.

"My son sent his compliments, and regrets, Mrs. Stonham. He was recalled today. He asked for extension over the New Year, but it was refused. He left by the early train this morning."

"Oh, indeed; how tiresome for you! said Hilda, and felt herself colouring, under the old lady's steady gaze.

"I'm not so sorry—nor was he. This sort of thing is not what the boys want when they come home. I made a mistake in bringing him here."

Hilda could think of nothing to say. Her fair, calm face, with its aureole of golden hair, presented its usual inscrutable expression.

"How long are you going to stay?" asked Mrs. Legertwood.

Hilda shook her head.

"I don't know. All places are alike. I am sick of my life."

"You would get fresh interest if you would bestir yourself. Why not try some war-work?"

"I couldn't nurse. I loathe sick people,—and I couldn't sit making bandages or Red Cross jackets. The only thing I would really like to do is to drive a motor, and, unfortunately, I don't possess one to drive."

"There are the canteens—that is interesting. I am going back to France, to my Hut, next week. If you like, I will take you."

No one knows whence such impulses come. Mrs. Legertwood had no such thought in her mind when she opened the conversation. Indeed she could quite truly have said that Mrs. Stonham was the last person in the world she would have invited to share her work at the Base Camp in France.

"Do you really mean that, Mrs. Legertwood? I should love it, and once I could speak French well."

"All to the good—but the work is very hard, and your beautiful hands would suffer."

"I should not mind that. I really would like to be doing something," she said impulsively. "I'm not very happy, and I don't know what to do with my life."

They had many long talks in the next two days, and the results was that all arrangements were made, and Hilda agreed to follow Mrs. Legertwood directly all her papers came through. They were considerable delayed, and it was the middle of February before she actualgot away. In the interval, she saw her husband only once; and once more, the figure he cut in the uniform of a private soldier, and various signs of the reality of the training, filled her with a fastidious disgust.

Their brief interview was not a success, and the wall between them seemed to rise higher and higher, until it shut out all that was intimate and human. She did not even tell him about her plans for France, she merely said that she hoped to let the flat, and after that, her plans were indefinite.

Stonham returned to the Oxshott Camp rather depressed in spirits, yet with a curious feeling at the back of it all, that he had done the right thing, and that somehow, good would come out of what seemed a very unsatisfactory state of affairs between him and his wife. Had he been asked for a definite pronouncement on the situation, he might have answered that at least it was not any worse than it had been; nay, even that it might be better; it certainly was so for him. For, in Oxshott Camp, a man among men, Stonham was finding his soul.

As for his wife—her idea of going out to France was not very clear. She was not inspired by any high ideal or desire for service; it simply represented a welcome means of escape from a life that had been suddenly shorn of most of the gods she had worshipped.

Everybody was at war-work; even the most frivolous of her friends seemed to have suddenly turned over a new leaf. And she was an object of general envy because she was going to France.

One delay followed another, and March was actually in before she was able to make the crossing to Havre, and then up to Rouen, to the camp where Mrs. Legertwood had installed her hut.

The whole thing was a tremendous revelation to Hilda Stonham, and for the first time, serving tea and coffee to endless reinforcements, over a counter which she was expected to keep clean, she began to realise the war.

How a human soul is awakened to a sense of its destiny and calling, is always difficult to analyse. It is usually better not to attempt it; but rather, just to describe what actually happened.

Hilda did not like the work at first. She hated the unbecoming overall; the grubby little kitchen, where she had often to wrestle single-handed with refractory stoves and boilers. But gradually she began to be interested, and to take pride in keeping the hut and all it stood for, up to the mark.

And from that time, it was but a step to living interest in the men for whom the work was done. She was very good to look at, and when she smiled, any man was proud and pleased to be noticed by her. So, gradually she began to win their confidence, and to be ready to help and advise them on all sorts of subjects.

Mrs. Legertwood, looking on, was surprised at first; but always glad, and there was no jealousy in her heart, when she saw how the younger woman, opening out the stores of sympathy she had never really drawn upon till now, became a magnet drawing lonely hearts to her. It was in its way a lovely thing to watch, and Hilda's face soon began to show the sign and seal of her awakening.

As the months rolled by, a certain wistfulness began to creep into her eyes, for she had no news of Gilbert. He had ceased to write letters; she was not even aware whether his battalion had been sent to any of the fighting fronts. Out of her love and sympathy for the boys, there began to grow an entirely new and strange tenderness towards the one boy whom—in his own language—she had "turned down" for his too literal obedience to the call,—"Your King and Country need you."

Time passes quickly when one's hands are full, and suddenly, one wild December day, Hilda Stonham realised that Christmas would be upon them immediately, and that they must make great preparations to celebrate it in the Reinforcement Camp.

Everybody being of the same mind, preparations went forward with much enthusiasm, and the boys so far from home, at least were going to be given a very good imitation of the real thing. On the Thursday of the week before Christmas, Hilda got off for a couple of hours, as she had promised to play and sing at a concert for convalescent patients at a distant part of the camp. She did not care for hospitals; the sight of broken and suffering men gave her too many pangs; and, when she got up to sing, her voice was a little quavering to begin with.

But she went bravely through, and when they encored her, vociferously, she gave them the old favourite—"Keep the Home Fires Burning," asking them to join in the chorus.

Fortunately, it was the last verse, before her eyes, roving to the back of the big ward, caught sight of a face she had not forgotten. It was Gilbert, and he had such a queer expression that she was hard put to it to keep on singing to the end.

He was still standing when she got out, leaning heavily on his crutch, and he waited for her to make the advance.

"Gibbie!—Why, Gibbie!" she said falteringly. "Where have you come from?"

"Down from Festubert—ever so long ago," he answered, trying to speak lightly. "And you—I suppose you've come out with one of the concert parties."

"No, no! I'm working at the Canteen in Number Six Hut. But where can we talk, Gibbie? There are simply oceans to say!"

"I don't know—unless we go outside. There's a bit of sun on just at the minute, and I'm out of doctors hands practically. You never got my letter, then, saying I was coming home in about ten days or so?"

She shook her head.

"No, I never got it. The flat is let, Gibbie. But let us get out side—I'm stifling here."

She took hold of his arm and helped him to hobble out, nobody paying any attention, for it was quite a common occurance.

"I want to hear all about you, and why you haven't written," she said quickly.

"I thought you didn't want to hear—that you were done with me, in fact, Hilda, till I'd made good. It was a big scrap up there, where I got my dose,—had three operations on this old leg, but, thank God, they've saved it."

"Thank God!" she repeated; and her full sweet lips quivered pitifully. So did Stonham's, but there was a sweetness at his heart like the shining of the sun.

"And have you been here all the time, Gibbie?"

"Yes—whole two months."

"And I, only ten minutes distant! If only I'd known! I'll go back to England with you, Gibbie. I haven't had any leave yet. We'll spend Christmas at home."

"In the flat?"

"No—at Falmouth. Do you remember the days we had there, at—at— the beginning?"

"Am I likely to forget them?" he answered simply as a child. "But won't it be rough on you, old girl, carting around a common Tommy, and an old crock at that?"

She laid her hand on his lips.

"Don't Gibbie! I've had my lesson. I've lived among them for nine months; I love them—gentlemen, all! And I'm proud to belong to one—"

There was nobody in sight, just then, and she turned to him suddenly and kissed him.

"I've been a rotten wife, Gibbie; but I'll do better. I've learned from Tommy. You won't cast me off?"

"God forbid!" he said, and his eyes, so long sad and unfathomable, filled with tears. "But I ought to tell you, Hilda, I've earned my promotion—done, what I set out to do. And I go back to England to take up my commission."

"I'll help you choose your kit—but I'll walk down Regent Street with my Tommy, first!" she said, then, under her breath adding softly:—"Christmas at home—thank God!"

OURS BUT TO TRUST

New friends will brighten the way and the old
Still will grow dearer, new strength will be ours;
New hopes will come with their joys to unfold,
Paths will be sweetened with sunshine and flowers.

There will be laughter on lips that we love.
There will be smiles to endear and to charm;
There will be rainbows and starlight above,
Guidance to help us and keep us from harm.

Answer to prayer shall be ours and may
No one turn from his hope in despair;
Rest there shall be for the weary who say:
"Skies will be cloudless and all will be fair."

This is the faith we must harbor and hold,
This is the joy that should rest in the heart.
Life holds a promise that's brighter than gold—
Ours but to trust and to do well our part!

MYRTELLA SUTHERLAND.

THE WORLD NEEDS YOUR WORK.

The world has gone through the hell of war and come out maimed and suffering. Honest work, decent living, earnest thinking and doing were never needed more than now. From the youngest starting out, to the old man and woman, every one of courage and real character will determine to make this year the best thus far, as a preparation for making the others still better.